

HOW TO MARKET YOUR CHARTER SCHOOL LIKE A PR PRO: USING EARNED MEDIA

by

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Introduction

It's no secret that businesses and non-profits spend billions of dollars every year on high-powered advertising campaigns that attempt to cut through the noise in order to capture the attention of their target audiences. Unfortunately, paid advertising has resulted in "media overload" for too many. A 2004 poll conducted by the Yankelovich Partners on behalf of the American Association of Advertising Agencies found that a resounding 65 percent of respondents said they believed that they "are constantly bombarded with too much" advertising. Yet, to be successful, your charter school will likely have to market itself. What should you do?

Being aware that marketing is causing consumers to feel glazed-over and disconnected, many organizations are seeking new, more personalized ways to connect with people.

Fortunately, such paid advertising isn't the only means of marketing your charter school. In fact, earned media—positive news coverage that you actively work to get by creating and pitching newsworthy stories, events, or announcements to news outlets in your area—is not only free, it's generally considered to be more objective by the consumers. Because of this, earned media is often regarded by public relations (PR) professionals as commanding a higher level of credibility and respect. And that's what you want.

It follows then, that if your charter school has few resources to spend on marketing, you will need to create and maintain effective earned media campaigns. These campaigns will not only help you get your message to your audience, they will also help you develop strong, positive relationships with local reporters, editors and producers that may be able to shield your school from negative stories when a crisis hits.

This monograph provides practical tips and insights to help you launch your own earned media campaigns. I've included references at the end for those who wish to do more reading.

Two Rules to Ensure an Effective Earned-Media Campaign

All effective campaigns, media or otherwise, work from a central principle: Plan the work and then work the plan. That's primarily why when stakeholders and decision-makers gather, they want to know what is the existing plan and how well it is working at achieving their goal.

All plans adhere to the rules peculiar to their situations. Advertisers will follow certain formulas that have achieved past successes, military planners will tailor their strategies with established rules of engagement, and even (most) politicians stick to particular rules, especially those known as campaign laws.

Likewise, effective earned-media campaigns follow their own rules. To get stories published as news and have them effect a desired outcome, public-relations people within an organization must follow two rules: (1) Ensure that a story is newsworthy and (2) make the story easy for reporters to cover, usually through some press-friendly event. The first takes imagination; the second takes work. Both require advance time to craft the particular message and plan whatever press-friendly event is envisioned.

An event might be as simple as a press conference, the release of a report, or the introduction of legislation. It might be where two or more traditional events like these are combined, with added features like planned interviews with stakeholders, or access to a particular site, or to the people who are actually the substance of the story.

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follow the two rules of newsworthiness and ease of coverage unwaveringly because the more closely they follow the two rules, the more likely their event will be covered. They also stay engaged with a particular subject (e.g., a piece of legislation or a soon-to-be-released expert study) and make an effort to foresee possible positive (or negative) coverage. By doing so, they are able to ensure the greatest possible amount of success in communicating their organization's message to the public and, consequently, to the decision-makers they ultimately wish to influence.

The First Rule: Make It Newsworthy

Having one or more of five qualities in an event will dictate whether the event is newsworthy and, therefore, more likely to get covered in the way most desired. To be newsworthy, an event must have one, some, or all of these five things: Timeliness, pathos—evokes emotion, entertainment, data value, and graphic value. To get desirable coverage, i.e., on the front page or the front of a particular section, an event should have two or more of these qualities (and the more the better). Given the importance of these five qualities let us examine each of them.

Newsorthy Quality #1: Timeliness

If it happened yesterday, it is too old. All news organizations thrive on news, with the emphasis on “new.” The subject of the story itself doesn’t have to be new, but there must be something that happened or is about to happen that will trigger the urgency on the part of the news organization to cover the event. Too often, inexperienced PR people try to make something new by “releasing” it. Example: Legislation to create a new

state flag is introduced. It is timely on the day of the introduction. For entertainment purposes (see below), it might be mildly newsworthy if the press picks up on the bill several days after it was introduced, but the point is not simply to get covered. By leaking—a common practice of sharing information before it is formally released—the news of the bill to a selected reporter or media outlet the day before the bill’s introduction, the story can get much more desirable coverage. Thus, a story running on the same day as the bill’s introduction, along with, say, a proposed new design would be timely, entertaining, graphic, and would probably also evoke some emotion (have pathos) and likely to receive front page coverage.

Ensuring timeliness demands that PR professionals maintain a daily awareness of ongoing issues, ones that might be characterized as “hot button.” Examples would be analyses of school performance (especially those done by organizations or individuals hostile to charter public schools); the life of a bill that would affect the organization’s stakeholders; and statements by politicians that need endorsement or denunciation by the organization.

Ensuring timeliness also means developing techniques to ensure the story or event is fresh (or appears fresh), such as leaking information about a story to a reporter with whom the PR professional has a good, ongoing relationship; or getting sources to the reporter before a story “breaks,” i.e., making sure that the source is available and has talking points (discussed later) to discuss with the reporter before the event happens.

The importance of timeliness cannot be underestimated. The charter school leader who develops a sense for what is “new” will be able to leverage his or her awareness to the advantage of his or her school.

Newsworthy Quality #2: Pathos

pths, -thôs¹ 1. A quality, as of an experience or a work of art, that arouses feelings of pity, sympathy, tenderness, or sorrow. 2. The feeling, as of sympathy or pity, so aroused.

Reporters want desperately for their readers to connect emotionally with the people in their stories (love them, hate them, feel sorry for them, whatever). How do they do this? To make a story or event emotionally connect, it needs real people who are affected by the issue.

How can you use pathos to help your charter school obtain more press? Think about graduations. Does your charter school have a student that beat the odds and graduated near the top of his or her class? How about back to school time? Here is a great opportunity to highlight a group of students that volunteered helping senior citizens during the summer. What about the holidays? Did your school help with the local food or toy drive? How much did your students collect or donate? You also have: March is Reading Month, Veterans' Day, Thanksgiving – the opportunities are endless. Sit down in August and start a calendar of all the opportunities throughout the school year that you can use to draw positive attention to your charter school and students.

Newsworthy Quality #3: Entertainment

Charter school stories are generally involved in serious issues, so not much is meant for laughs. On the other hand, stories about a charter school student winning the state spelling or geography bee, landing first place in an art contest, or receiving a service club scholarship generate an inordinate amount of interest—and are great “good news” stories that typically also have great visuals—the student with her trophy or video of her spelling the winning word, etc.

(See Newsworthy Quality #5.)

And a word of caution, you want to be careful that your charter school doesn't become fodder for entertainment through scandals, poor governance or other issues that would arouse scoffing.

Newsworthy Quality #4: Data Value

Here is where the release of reports and studies get their due. Not all reports are going to be newsworthy, even if released with an attempt at great fanfare. Indeed, many of the most efficient reports have a sort of latent strength—they become powerful tools after sitting around for some months, or even a year or more.

But, when the state department of education releases the results of the standardized test scores, you betcha the results will be used early and often—mostly to draw attention to and be critical of low performing charter schools.

What to do in this case? Own it. Never deny the results, accept them and explain how your charter school's academic program was designed to help the students gain academic ground and use your own data to support your school's initiatives. Does your school conduct computer adaptive on-line testing or use other assessment models? What do the results show? When administered throughout the year, a school can gauge the growth of a student and show whether that student came in behind grade-level but has obtained a year or more of academic growth during the school year.

Newsworthy Quality #5: Graphic Value

In the business of journalism, there is a thing called the chain of interest. The last link in that chain is what is known as ‘visuals.’ It works like this:

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profit. Media CEOs want shareholders to be happy. Publishers and station managers want CEOs to be happy. Editors and producers want publishers and station managers to be happy. Reporters want editors and producers to be happy, so they are charged with the task of thinking about visuals.

Regardless of the medium, the story will get better play if an accompanying visual is informative, entertaining, or even shocking.

Even in modern radio reporting, there is the attempt to create a “theater of the mind,” in which sounds are used to create in the mind of the listener a sense that he or she is closer to the actors in the story.

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The Second Rule: Make It Easy for Reporters to Cover the Story

After planning the event and its objective—making it newsworthy—follow rule number two for a successful earned-media campaign: Make the story easy for reporters to cover.

However, before you make that call to a reporter or e-mail out a press release, there are some basic rules of etiquette in dealing with the media. Learn these basic rules on how and when to deal with the media and the experience will be a lot less painful, not to mention less embarrassing. You may be new to the PR game, but the reporters don’t have to know it.

- Know what you are going to say before you say it. Newsrooms are busy places full of potential stories. Have your 5-10 second persuasive pitch

ready and rehearsed. Use your talking points to guide your conversation.

- Never call a newsroom—print or broadcast—immediately prior to a broadcast or after 3 p.m., when most reporters are rushing to meet deadlines.
- Keep a list of reporters from the local newspaper, radio and television stations that cover education. Maintain a list of their direct phone and fax numbers and e-mail addresses.
- Most reporters and editors prefer to be contacted in writing first—either by e-mail or fax—so developing your contact list and keeping it up-to-date is critical.

Now, seven key tools are available to help you best deliver your message. They are: fact sheets, talking points, drop-in articles, op-eds (*which is opposite the editorial page abbreviated*), media advisories, press releases, and letters to the editor. Remember, each tool can stand on its own or be paired with another, depending on your strategy.

First, start with the who, what, when, where and how, then decide the most efficient way to communicate this information. Whether an op-ed, article, press release, letter to the editor or some combination, each instrument has a specific purpose and is outlined below.

Tool #1: Fact Sheet

Purpose and description: A fact sheet gives a brief description of the school’s mission, address, phone numbers, principal’s name, date of establishment, etc. A well prepared fact sheet saves the reporter hours of time and increases the school’s chance of press coverage.

Send to: Included in press packets or attached to a press release.

Length: One page.

Date due to the press: At time of event or with distribution of press release.

Here is an example of what a charter school fact sheet should look like:

Overview

A short paragraph about when the school opened, who founded it, and what's unique about it.

2007-2008 Highlights:

Exemplary test scores, student competitions and recognitions, the opening of a new building opening or adding more grades to the school.

Student population:

Enrollment numbers, how much has the school grown since it opened, number of special education students, percentage of graduates who go on to college or receive scholarships.

Teachers:

Information about the teacher/student ratio, teachers' average years of experience, how many of the original teachers are still working at the school.

Curriculum:

Explain the school's philosophy along with the curriculum and programs that are used to teach it.

Tool #2: Talking Points

Purpose and description: Talking points are simply those key facts about your school or event that you would like to see the reporter use in the story. The advantage to writing them down is that any school leader or board member can easily use them to advance your school's key message. Also, you can use talking points repeatedly in a wide variety of media.

Send to: Use for internal purposes only.

Length: Three principle points, 2-4 secondary points.

Date due to the press: n/a.

Here is an excerpt from talking points developed by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools and posted on their Web site, www.publiccharters.org.

- Facts and Figures – February 22, 2006 Nearly 1.1 million children attend one of the nation's 3,625 charter schools. This is about 2 percent of all K-12 students in the country.
- Forty states and the District of Columbia have a charter school law. The 10 states that do not have a charter law are: Alabama, Kentucky, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Washington, West Virginia, and Vermont.
- The average number of charter schools per state has been increasing steadily each year, from 25 in 1995, to 59 in 2000 to nearly 90 today. On average, over 250 charter schools have been added each year for the past 12 years.
- Arizona, California, and Florida have the highest number of charter schools, accounting for 42 percent of the nation's charter schools.
- Many charter school laws provide significantly less funding to public charter schools. In a national survey conducted in 2002-2003, public charters schools reported receiving \$5,688 per pupil in operating dollars on average. According to the Common Core of Data, district public schools receive \$8,529 on average.
- There are about 600 charter school authorizers nationwide sponsoring five charter schools each on average.

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Proofread, proofread, proofread. You may want to have several people review your article before you submit it for publication to ensure consistency of thought and free of grammar errors. You don't want to have an article coming from your school that includes grammatical errors.

- According to a 2005 survey, 90 percent of authorizers are local school districts; 5 percent are higher education institutions, 3 percent are state agencies, and 2 percent are state agencies.
- As of January 2004, more than 300 charter schools had closed, representing about 9 percent of charter schools ever opened.

Tool #3: Drop-In Article

Purpose and description: To publish your views in newspapers. Most often used by weekly community papers.

Send to: Weekly newspaper editor.

Length: 500-700 words maximum.

Date due to the press: At least one month prior to event.

Drop-in articles are typically used to highlight an upcoming event or activity and to prominently feature the name and title of the author in the byline. Some points to remember when writing a drop-in article are:

- Research your subject by searching public charter school Web sites or use a “pre-fab” drop-in article provided by an organization for a specific occasion, such as National Charter Schools Week.
- Think of a topic for each paragraph. 5-7 paragraphs are usually sufficient to meet the 500-700 word count usually reserved for drop-in articles. You will find it easier if you concentrate on writing paragraphs, not the complete article. Once you have completed the 5-7 paragraphs, place them in a logical order.
- Include your name, title, and Web site address. Also, include your telephone number and e-mail address so the editors can contact you directly, if necessary.

- Proofread, proofread, proofread. You may want to have several people review your article before you submit it for publication to ensure consistency of thought and free of grammar errors. You don't want to have an article coming from your school that includes grammatical errors. Don't be like the school mentioned on *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno, which boasted of “academic excellance.”

Tool #4: Op-ed

Purpose and description: To express your opinions on issues or policies and an effective means to explain a complex issue. Op-ed is the abbreviated form of ‘opposite the editorial.’

Send to: Editorial page editor.

Length: 750 words maximum.

Date due to the press: 10 days or more before the event.

Here's a checklist to keep your op-ed on track: ²

- Focus tightly on one issue or idea in your first paragraph. Be brief.
- Express your opinion, then base it on factual, researched or firsthand information.
- Be timely and controversial, but not outrageous. Be the voice of reason.
- Be personal and conversational; it can help you make your point.
- Be humorous, provided that your topic lends itself to humor. But don't be trite.
- Have a clear editorial viewpoint; come down hard on one side of the issue. Don't equivocate.
- Provide insight and understanding: Educate your reader without being preachy.
- Near the end, clearly re-state your position and issue a call to action. Don't philosophize.

- Have verve and “fire in the gut” indignation to accompany your logical analysis.
- Don't let your op-ed unfold slowly, as in an essay.
- Use clear, powerful, direct language. Emphasize active verbs and forget the adjectives and adverbs, which only weaken writing.
- Avoid clichés and jargon.
- Appeal to the average reader. Clarity is paramount.
- Write 750 double-spaced words or less (fewer is always better).
- Include a brief bio, along with your phone number, e-mail address, and mailing address at the bottom.

Tool #5: Media Advisory

Purpose and description: To notify the media about your activities. Provide the who, what, when, where, how, and why of your event or activity, including just enough information to entice the media to attend the event. Also include driving directions or a map, if necessary.

Send to: Education reporters from your contact list and assignment editors for TV and radio stations.

Length: One page maximum.

Date due to the press: 3 - 5 days prior to the event.

Tool #6: Press Release

Purpose and description: To summarize and present your event or activity and provide reporters with background information, facts, and quotations from key people.

Send to: Education reporters and TV/radio assignment editors and news directors.

Length: Two pages maximum.

Date due to the press: Day of event.

On receiving your press release, news editors will glance at the headline or the lede (opening paragraph) to get the gist of your story. If it fails to attract their attention or interest, then the release will get discarded. The most effective releases typically seek to convey only one central message or point with enough appropriate information to support that message.

Make sure it speaks to the interests of the editor's readers/listeners/viewers. And make sure it always covers the journalist's need to know who, what, when, where, why, and whenever possible, the how. Be sure to cover all of the facts, but keep your releases simple and succinct.

Tool #7: Letter to the Editor

Purpose and description: Allows school leaders, parents, students and teachers to respond, either positively or negatively, to a previously published article on charter schools. A letter might take issue with a reporter's description of the facts, for example, or with something said by a person quoted in an article.

Send to: Editor of the newspaper.

Length: 100-300 words.

Date due to the press: No later than three days after original story appeared.

Pitch: Follow-up only.

Despite the majority of headlines and the stories that lead off the evening news broadcasts, people do want to hear hopeful stories. Your school has great stories to tell – you just need to share them!

Summary

Letters to the editor receive heavy attention from activists, political leaders, and community residents. Moreover, new opportunities crop up every day as more and more newspapers publish cyber-letters on their Web sites.

Despite the majority of headlines and the stories that lead off the evening news broadcasts, people do want to hear hopeful stories. Your school has great stories to tell – you just need to share them!

Fact: A reporter will not come to you looking for good news stories, however, a reporter be the first one knocking on your door or calling a soon as there's bad news to cover.

Fact: Working with the media takes a lot of effort.

By using the tools provided above, you can increase the chance a reporter will cover your event and increase awareness of your event or issue. With planning, clarity, responsiveness, and plenty of internal communication within your organization the effort you invest will pay off.

Footnotes:

¹ The American Heritage[®] Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Copyright © 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Published by the Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved

² <http://www.aboutpublicrelations.net/ucmclaina.htm>

Suggested Reading:

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From the CEO of the National Charter Schools Institute

Affiliated with Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, Michigan since its inception in 1995, the National Charter Schools Institute is committed to advancing quality in the charter school sector through publications, conference presentations and tailored technical assistance to charter schools.

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If you would like to discuss the prospect of board governance training or other kinds of technical assistance, please e-mail me at bcarpenter@nationalcharterschools.org, or call the Institute at (989) 774-2999 (Monday through Friday, 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, EST). Finally, any feedback you might wish to suggest to improve this, or any of our publications, would be valued.